Elena Bilaqeta

A WOMAN WHO SEES WITH HER HEART

Nelson Valjean

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

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Blindness could not defeat a dauntless lady who found a substitute for her eyes

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A Woman Who Sees With Her Heart

by NELSON VALJEAN

IN HONOR OF her husband's birthday, Mrs. Elena Zelayeta whipped up what she casually called a "simple buffet snack"—two turkeys done to perfection, 150 tamales, 150 savory *empanadas* filled with creamed crab and oyster, two kinds of salad, seven kinds of cookies and a huge frosted birthday cake. Any woman would be proud of preparing such a spread, even with skilled help. But Elena did it alone—and she is totally blind!

The 72 guests who crowded her San Francisco flat pronounced the meal a masterpiece—familiar words to this brown-eyed, vivacious little woman who has been doing for others throughout almost eleven years of darkness. She now stimulates not only those who see her in action but especially the blind and others physically disabled.

"If you learn to be useful and keep busy, no handicap can hold you down," she says.

Mrs. Zelayeta lives her simple philosophy every minute of the day, lecturing, broadcasting, writing, teaching and preparing sweets for her 19-year-old son in the Navy—enough, he swears, for half the fleet. Between times, "to keep from getting rusty," she cooks, washes and irons, and cares for an 11-year-old son whom she has never seen.

Such accomplishments would have seemed fantastically impossible in 1934, when she and her husband were operating a restaurant. Polishing a mirror one morning, Elena's reflection failed to brighten. She stifled a gasp, but each day went back to look again. Her reflection continued to fade. When Mr. Zelayeta saw her bumping into tables, he asked what was wrong.

"I think it's my eyes," she said.

A specialist told her the truth. "My dear little woman," he said gently, "I hate to say this, but you're going to be blind the rest of your life."

The shock was too great. At that instant Elena's vision snapped off like a light. An hour earlier she had been able to see her way into the doctor's office; now she left it in blackness.

"At first," Elena says, "I couldn't take it. Day after day, I sat in a chair, never moving, trying not to think. I despaired of everything."

Three months after she went blind, a second son arrived. Elena fondled his tiny hands and feet, nursed him, and went on brooding.

Her husband hired women to help her, but they proved worthless. One day, feeling her way through the kitchen, she found little Billy on the floor, eating

the next World's Fair we may see a mechanical man that can do all those things and walk through a maze of obstacles as well. Equipped with radar "eyes," the automaton could navigate a labyrinth, tell you precisely how far you stand from him, even focus a camera and take your picture.

You could put this mechanical man in a plane and he could describe the terrain flown over and compute the exact distance to the ground. He would recognize large and small objects, and identify objects of different shapes. He could point a gun at a target—even a moving one—and score a bull's-eye every time.

Fantastic? Not at all. Radar can do these things right now. Before long, science's new prodigy of electronics will grow out of the experimental stage and begin to share the labors of millions of busy American men and women.

Nuggets in Jest and Earnest

♕ **Short Takes:** "How old are you, my little man?" "I don't know, sir. Mother was 26 when I was born, but now she's only 24."—*Sterling Sparks* . . . "Well, I hear you and Tom are to be married. I thought you two were merely having a flirtation." "So did Tom."—*Carlisle's Suggestions* . . . "Why, he's a perfect gentleman. All you have to do is slap his face once in a while."—*The Bealiner* . . . Defeat is only bitter when you swallow it.—*Penquanoc Pow Pow*

♕ The only way to get rid of a past is to get a future out of it. —*Zephyr* . . . If you don't claim too much intelligence people will give you credit for more than you have. —*Masonic Pocket Magazine* . . . The three ages of man: school tablet; aspirin tablet; stone tablet.—*The Burning Question*

♕ "He's the type that likes to mow the lawn in the winter and shovel snow in the summer."—*The Colonel Says* . . . Divorce simply means that democracy has failed to work between two people.—*The Flame*

♕ One of the easiest ways to become popular is to remember the nice things folks say about a person, and repeat them to him. —*Bert Barnes* . . . If you want the rainbow, remember, you have to wait until the shower is over.—*The Forge* . . . Wild oats make a lousy breakfast.—*The Blue Jacket*

♕ There has never been a self-made man who did not need alteration of some kind or another. —Frank Effinger . . . The hardest tumble a man can make is to fall over his own bluff—Ambrose Bierce . . . It often shows a fine command of language to say nothing.—*The Barger Bulletin* . . . "What a pity human beings can't exchange problems. Everyone knows how to solve the other fellow's."—*The Burning Question*

♕ **Romance Angle:** She whines him around her finger.—J. Porter . . . A pin-up girl is a girl who proclaims her charm from the hose tops.—Pete Simer . . . Love makes time pass and time makes love pass.—John Newton Baker

something. She tasted it. It was washing soda.

That night she said to her husband, "I have fired my helper. From now on I will take care of my family."

Mr. Zelayeta protested. "You went blind, and now you are losing your mind."

"No, no. Let me try what I want," Elena begged. "In Mexico the woman waits upon the man. It may save me."

Convinced that a blind person's remaining senses do not automatically become keener, Elena deliberately whetted them. Especially she used her hands. Over and over she practiced the simplest tasks until she mastered them—"like in kindergarten." In a short time she was bathing and feeding the baby.

"I worked out a feeding process. By putting a finger on his chin, I found I could guide the spoon to his mouth without trouble."

In cooking, she discovered she could separate egg yolks from whites by breaking the shells in her cupped palm, where the yolks remained while the whites ran through her fingers. She measured salt and spices by sifting them across a finger. By spearing garlic buds with toothpicks, she could insert them in her pots, then remove them when necessary.

She set the gas oven by feeling the ridges on the heat-regulator knob. She knew nothing of Braille clocks, nor that the hour could be told by removing a clock's face and feeling the hands, so she hit upon another way of timing her cooking. If a cake required a half-hour's baking, two 15-minute radio programs would see it done.

Six months after Elena resolved to care for herself and family, she hung out a big wash, cooked dinner and baked a beautiful cake. When her husband got over his astonishment he said, "My darling, you are hired for life."

"I blushed like a schoolgirl," she laughingly recalls.

Later, with both sons in school and her husband away at work, Elena agreed to try another assistant—this time, a dog. It was a happy solution. Chulita, a guide dog which gladly adopted her, willingly took over tasks from her younger son. When Elena was induced to bring her philosophy before high school and college assemblies, Chulita led the way. When she gave a series of inspirational broadcasts, Chulita stood beside her at the microphone. As her activities increased her new and faithful companion was always nearby, even when Mrs. Zelayeta gave cooking demonstrations before amazed audiences of 1,000.

Association with so many people deeply affected Elena, who completely regained self-assurance, grace and poise. Her appreciation of friends became greater than be-

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fore, for now she was judging them not by external appearances but by their voices, the touch of their hands, their personalities.

"It may sound funny, but I really believe I was learning to see with my heart or my soul—call it whatever you want."

In off moments Elena wrote a cook book. When it proved successful—it has now sold more than 14,000 copies—she and Chulita volunteered their services to the San Francisco Center for the Blind. Ever since, one day a week, Elena has taught her recipes and cooking methods at the Center's kitchen. Under her direction her worshipful students prepare elaborate meals.

"Cooking is one thing I thoroughly enjoy," Elena told a young man who had lost his eyesight in the Merchant Marine. "But after all, our chores needn't be drudgery. They are blessings if we do them for others. The more we serve, the richer our lives become."

The youth listened stonily, then blurted out: "If you weren't a woman, I'd tell you to go to hell!"

When she realized he wasn't yet ready for such optimistic opinions, she touched his arm. "Forget it," she said softly. "Come with me and we'll make some coffee."

In future contacts she won him over completely. Today he has a good job and a bright outlook. He glowingly says of her, "She saved my life."

This is typical of the inspiration that comes from Elena Zelayeta, the self-taught little Mexican philosopher who paradoxically sees with her heart because she gives so much of it away.

Bedside Manner

THE DOCTOR LEFT the patient's bedroom and joined the anxious husband. "I don't like the way your wife looks," he announced.

"Well, doctor," said the husband, "to be perfectly honest with you, I don't care much for her looks either, but she sure takes good care of me and the kids."

—HELEN HAYES

"WHY DID YOU put me in the same room with that fellow?" asked the indignant patient. "The hospital is crowded," the doctor explained. "Has he been troublesome?"

"Troublesome! He's crazy! Keeps looking around and saying, 'No lions, no tigers, no elephants.' And all the time the room is full of them."

—ROBERT SUMMET

A GENTLEMAN who had undergone a medical examination for a life insurance policy received a wire: "Regret to inform you that tests show you have pneumonia, heart disease and ulcer." An hour later, however, a second telegram arrived. "Sorry," it said, "first telegram mistake. Confused your examination with that of another applicant."

The relieved man wired them immediately: "Sorry, but I committed suicide half an hour ago."

—P. G. FREDERICKS

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